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What is Ongoing Formation?

by Hugh F. O'Donnell, C.M.

Province of China

Ongoing formation is a process for keeping up with the times in one's chosen profession. Initial formation and professional training are only the foundations of a lifelong process of being current and up-to-date. It is consequently a professional responsibility to be committed to ongoing formation. Professionals owe it to the people they profess to serve and to themselves as responsible professionals. No one wants bypass surgery or a hip replacement from a surgeon who is ten years behind the times.

Many professions, particularly in the medical field, require in-service training and recertification on a regular basis. This is often done by a group of peers. The Church and religious communities in principle do not have this practice beyond occasional workshops, annual meetings, and sabbaticals, which, generally, however, do not make demands beyond participation or personal discretion. Some communities certainly are more advanced and intentional in this area than others. Sometimes the meetings are used as a stage in diocesan or religious planning processes. I think it is also fair to say that participation in contemporary movements, like Cursillo, Marriage Encounter, Focolare, Neo-Catechumenate and Journaling, on the one hand, and professional training in psychology, pastoral counseling, social work, organizational development and management on the other, manifest a deeper interior longing to be up-to-date, relevant, effective and professional.

The use of the word "professional" may disturb some readers, since we are talking about the Church, priesthood, religious communities and communities of apostolic life. Ours is not a profession, it is a vocation rooted in the Divine Mystery of God's Love and the intangible elements that constitute the heart of our lifelong commitment. Still, there is a professional side to our vocation. We publicly put ourselves forward as capable and competent in leading and serving the People of God and in proclaiming the Good News to people of good will. We profess to be evangelizers and pastors capable of breaking the Bread of Life to those who hunger for God's Word. We are presumed to be leaders experienced in forming communities of dedicated disciples. We are expected to be prepared

to accompany mature Christians in the ups and downs of their faith journey. Being professional means we have to take responsibility for the public role we profess in the service of others.

When Pope John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Council he coined the expression “aggiornamento,” meaning “bringing up to date.” It was his perception that the Church had fallen behind the times and needed to catch up with the contemporary world in order to relate to it and preach the Gospel in it effectively. His vision was prophetic. He anticipated where God was leading his people. On the day the Council opened, 11 October 1962, he said in his homily, “Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relationships.” It became clear later that the new order would be one in which people did not rely on violence to settle difficulties and build human community.

Popes Paul VI and John Paul II followed the same path when they called for a “New Evangelization.” The Church needed, in their vision, to **renew her spiritual energies** and use **new methods** and a **new vocabulary** suited to the people of today. This implies a shift in the meaning of fidelity. Fidelity now embraces not only what God has revealed in the past but also responsiveness to what God is doing in the present and openness to what God is preparing for us in the future.

My initial formation took place in the 1950s in a world which was soon to pass away. The formation I received resembled much more what had gone before than what was to follow. Our philosophy and theology texts were in Latin and expressed unchanging meanings of dogma, moral and philosophy through a language no longer in daily use — which was considered an advantage. It suited the essentialist world of meanings in which we were formed. It was a specialized vocabulary that we hoped others might share so they could also grasp with the same reassuring certainty the foundational truths which were to guide our lives. It had many benefits and we often profited from it in later life, but it taught us little about historical consciousness and the contemporary scientific mindset. It was interested in the unchanging essence of things, while science had for a long time already been trying to explain the changing and observable accidents that our essentialist thinking left aside. Our formation was an instance of classical consciousness.

The world of classical consciousness had been under strain already for a long time and had to yield to the world of historical consciousness, most dramatically in and after the Second Vatican Council. In Catholic circles throughout the 20th century Scripture studies led the way into the world of historicity, historical consciousness, development and positive regard for change. Patristic studies and liturgical research in their turn shed new light on the

developmental and historical nature of belief and worship. Theology was slow in reentering the field of inquiry, but eventually did so through the pioneering work of Congar, de Lubac, Rahner, von Balthasar, and Lonergan among others. After all, Judeo-Christian religion is an historical religion in the most intimate sense of the word; our God is the God of history.

Besides embracing the historical, changing and developmental nature of life in the world, we have had to face two other realities. One is the unprecedented rate of change in our times; the other is the realization that one age is ending and another beginning.

The word “conversion” in the past almost always pointed to a singular, and often dramatic, change in the direction of one’s life, from a life of sin to one of obedience to God or from one religion to another. Today we speak of “continual conversion” or “ongoing conversion.” Conversion, while it still sometimes refers to a dramatic change, more often refers to the frequent, even daily, turning to God in new circumstances. Bernard Lonergan points out that the journey to authenticity, both as a person and as believer, calls for daily fidelity to the five laws of being human which lead to religious, moral, intellectual, psychic and social conversion. It is a lifelong process engaged in day by day. The five laws are: Be Attentive, Be Intelligent, Be Reasonable, Be Responsible and Be in Love with God.

In addition to being called to continual conversion, we are also called to be lifelong learners. We can learn through reading and study, through events and people, through the circumstances of daily life, through listening, through collaboration with others, through attentiveness to the Church’s ongoing dialogue with the world. There is a tidal wave of information coming our way. It calls for a habit of critical reflection. To this end ongoing formation can be a special blessing. It helps us sort things out and keep our focus.

The Second Vatican Council had a double thrust; one was “ressourcement,” going back to the sources, and the other was “aggiornamento,” catching up with the times, and, in this way, recasting our relationship with the world. The Council called religious communities, among whom we were grouped at the time, to go back to our founders and foundresses and reappropriate our charism, eventually renewing our charism in our own times. Continuing education and ongoing formation involve us in the same dynamic.

Reappropriating the charism of St. Vincent. Perhaps future generations of Vincentians will learn in initial formation all they need to know about St. Vincent’s life, works and charism, but for the present it is certain that the Council’s challenge to retrieve the charism of Vincent, purified and whole, is still underway. However much we may regret the passage of two and a half centuries between

the death of Vincent and the publication of Pierre Coste's 14 volumes of Vincent's letters, conferences and documents, and their translation into other languages, we are nevertheless living in a graced time for getting back to the sources and reappropriating Vincent's gift to us and to the world.

The 60 years since the Second World War (1945-2005) have been fruitful in revealing the face of Vincent anew. It has been said that traditional images of Vincent often hide more than they reveal about the saint. Deepening appreciation of the treasures in Coste and in the archives of the Congregation, further understanding of the history and habits of his times, seeing Vincent in context, in relation to the events and circumstances to which he responded and in which he discerned providential guidance, all these have cracked open the "sanctity" mold which imprisoned him and revealed the humanity and genius of Vincent. They even give an occasional glimpse into the sanctuary of his interior life of mystical communion with the Christ of Charity. It is clear that for our present generation the life and charism of St. Vincent constitute a necessary and integral part of ongoing formation.

Staying up with the times. This is the other and more obvious dimension of ongoing formation and one we share with many others in the Church. The times have changed and the rate of change has been extraordinary. In just ten years there are, for example, one billion users of the internet, among whom we count ourselves. In addition, there have emerged a "world consciousness" and an "historical consciousness." Bernard Lonergan writes, "We are aware of many very different cultures existing at the present time, and we are aware of the great differences that separate present from past cultures."¹ When there was one culture and that, for all practical purposes, was European, we who belonged to that world, directly or derivatively, had a fixed point from which to view and assess the rest of the world. The realization that there is no one normative culture, but that there are many cultures and they are self-validating, not validated externally through another culture, inevitably has created a revolution in our way of thinking and feeling. Each culture has its own authentic identity and set of meanings and values. In this regard the international character of the Congregation and of CIF are a great blessing. The confreres come from all over the world and are apostles to the whole world. This, of course, means we are called to an ongoing conversion of unexpected dimensions in terms of historical and cultural consciousness.

Formation and Transformation. Continuing education and ongoing formation are not the same thing, but they are often used

¹ BERNARD LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, 1972, p. 154.

interchangeably. Without trying to sort out these terms, I believe formation points to and anticipates transformation in a way education usually does not. I think of education, also training, in terms of information, insight and skills, whereas formation implies changes that are more personal, changes in attitude, outlook, understanding and eventual decision. Rosemary Haughton in her wonderful book on conversion many years ago identified the difference between formation and transformation and their relationship to each other. Formation aims at transformation but can never achieve it. Programs can provide formation, but transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit and the individual person freely responding to the lead of the Spirit. Formation makes the materials and tools of transformation available — the bricks and mortar, the steel and stone — but cannot build the building. Formation nevertheless has its important role. It can be that, when someone is ready to build for the future, nothing is available but a few discarded timbers and chipped stones.

Transformation goes by different names in the East and West. In the East it is called “Enlightenment,” in the West “Conversion.” Enlightenment comes at the end of a long process of purification and involves being tuned into all that is. In Buddhism, at least in some forms, Enlightenment is expressed in these words: “All is Emptiness, all is Compassion.” There is boundless compassion for all beings, especially all sentient and living beings. Thomas Merton saw this on the faces of the giant Buddhas in Sri Lanka. Emptiness creates the space for endless compassion. Daoism is a religion which aims at being completely tuned into the Way (the Dao or Tao) of all things. Though the comparison limps in a number of ways, you can think of St. Vincent being tuned into Divine Providence or tuned into Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is clear that there is detachment from a smaller personal view of things and surrender to something transcendent. In the West and particularly in the Gospel tradition, transformation is spoken of in terms of metanoia or conversion. John the Baptist called for metanoia and Jesus after him proclaimed: “Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand!” When the people were struck by Peter’s preaching on Pentecost Sunday, they asked what they were to do. Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized...!”

Sometimes formation programs are thought of as a vacation by those who come, and perhaps more often by those who do not. And there may be an element of truth in it, which I will talk about below. The real issue is the hidden dimension of the changes and transformations that are taking place in the individual participant. In the end, it is about conversion of mind and heart in the individual participant.

Bernard Lonergan places conversion at the heart of the theological enterprise and ultimately at the heart of the human journey to authenticity. There is a threefold conversion: a religious conversion, a moral conversion and an intellectual conversion. Some add a psychic or affective conversion and a socio-political conversion, but maybe that is for another day. What has always struck me about these three conversions is their order. The religious conversion is first. All our efforts to place religious conversion as the natural outcome of getting our act together humanly, psychologically, socially, philosophically have come up short — like the tower of Babel not tall enough to reach heaven. I would like to reflect on ongoing formation in terms of these three conversions, not in the sense of what a formation program promises to do for participants, but from the other side, what participants might do for themselves with the Spirit on their journey to authenticity today.